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This Week with David Brinkley

ABC TV

November 17, 1986

DAVID BRINKLEY: Coming next, Moshe Ahrens, Israeli Cabinet Minister; and shortly, the Senate Democratic leader and the Vice Chairman of the Senate Committee on Intelligence; and Robert McFarlane, formerly President Reagan's National Security Assistant who went to Iran.

In a moment.

[Announcements]

MR. BRINKLEY: Mr. Ahrens in New York, thank you very much for coming in. We're glad top have you with us today.

MINISTER AHRENS: Nice to be with you.

BRINKLEY: Here in the studio are George Will of ABC News and Sam Donaldson, ABC News White House correspondent.

Now, Mr. Minister, tell us as much as you can, or as much as you will about Israel's involvement in our dealings with Iran.

MINISTER AHRENS: Well, I think you won't be surprised, David, if I'm not in a position to add anything to what has already been said by the President.

But I think the important thing is to realize that there are two aspects of this issue on the arms shipments to Iran and the release of the hostages.

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One is the attempt to find or make connections with more positive, moderate elements in Iran, if there are such, the thing the President talked about. I think that's a legitimate objective.

Two, is sending arms in an attempt to reach that objective. I think that's not all bad. There's no way of affecting that crazy slugging match between these two crazy countries, Iraq and Iran. It's not going to change the balance of power. Maybe it will produce the result of making a connection that the President was looking for.

The other is the release of the hostages. And I think that has not been realized here, as far as I can tell from the media, is that these hostages are being held on Syrian controlled territory in Lebanon in the Bekaa Valley.

Now, Syria is the foremost terrorist state. They were just apprehended in trying to blow up an airliner and kill -- possibly killing -- with the intention of killing over 400 people. Nobody gets released in the Bekaa Valley except with the express approval of the Syrians.

MR. SAM DONALDSON: Mr. Minister, may I ask you if Israel would ship arms to Syria?

MINISTER AHRENS: I think that is the United States had decided to make this arrangement -- I will answer your question quite generally -- and if --

MR. DONALDSON: No, to Syria I said.

Would Israel ship arms to Syria in order to improve contacts?

MINISTER AHRENS: Well, no, Sam, that's very unlikely, and you know that. Israel and Syria are in a state of war.

MR. DONALDSON: Well, I asked that because you are

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suggesting that if the President shipped arms to Tehran, to Iran, in order to try to improve contacts, that somehow that's okay?

MINISTER AHRENS: I'd say, if the impression here by the people who are dealing in this matter -- and I don't know the details -- was that this would facilitate the objective of making contact with moderate elements there, I don't see that that's all bad. Because as I said, you could not affect the balance of power in that war that's being carried out between Iraq and Iran.

MR. DONALDSON: But it would be bad if Israel tried to ship arms to Damascus in order to make contact with moderate elements there, is that it?

MINISTER AHRENS: Well, for the very clear reason, Sam, that we might get hit by the Syrians the following day in a full-scale war. That's quite different, isn't it?

MR. DONALDSON: But of course Iran might use the weapons to attack, let us say, Saudi Arabia for the express purpose, let's say, of protecting that kingdom against Iran.

MINISTER AHRENS: Sam, that's not very likely, either. For the past six years Iranians have been straining all their resources, everything they've got, in this crazy war with the Iraqis. They're not about to turn on anybody, I don't think.

MR. DONALDSON: Mr. Ahrens, let's leave aside for a moment the question of whether or not the United States gave encouragement, a wink, a nudge, whatever. Has Israel been sending arms from whatever source, for whatever reason, to Iran?

MINISTER AHRENS: And I haven't come here to appear on this program to give you an authorized declaration on the policy that Israel follows on the sale of arms.

As a matter of fact, our policy is not to reveal

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MINISTER AHRENS: And I haven't come here to appear on this program to give you an authorized declaration on the policy that Israel follows on the sale of arms.

As a matter of fact, our policy is not to reveal extensively just what is done and why it's being done. I don't think that that is the question at issue in this case here.

MR. GEORGE WILL: In October, 1982, you were quoted in the Boston Globe as saying that Israel was indeed supplying arms to Iran, and that this was coordinated with the United States at almost the highest level, and had as its purpose to establish good relations with officers, particularly, who might be moderate elements in Iran. That's four years ago. Were you quoted accurately?

MINISTER AHRENS: Quoted accurately. And I confirmed the statement that was made by the Minister of Defense of Israel at the time.

There were attempts being made to make these kind of contacts. To the best of my knowledge they were not successful.

As we know, Iran today is run by the most extremist fanatical elements. My understanding of the recent case is that here was a renewed attempt, now by the United States, to make that kind of contact.

MR. WILL: Your argument is, in part, that nothing sent -- not that we're going to acknowledge that anything's been sent -- but nothing that's been sent will tip the balance in the war.

Is there not a danger, however, that the Chinese, to take just one example, and there are others, seeing now that the United States, which urged people not to send arms to Iran, has sent arms to Iran, could unleash a flood of arms to Iran, and indeed tip the balance in that war?

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MINISTER AHRENS: You know, this is a full-scale war, with a very large number of soldiers and tanks and airplanes participating.

It must be clear that both Iraq and Iran are geting massive shipments from China and various other places. And I don't think that the recent shipment of the planeload that the President talked about can change that by an iota, in my opinion.

MR. BRINKLEY: Mr. Minister, you mentioned, as has been mentioned frequently this week, moderate elements in Iran. And you raise the question if there are any.

I would like to ask you, is there any reason to believe there are any? And if there were any, wouldn't they be shot if they were found dealing with Israel and the United States?

MINISTER AHRENS: Iran's a big country. And my guess is that Khomeini's people don't have total control. There probably still are some remnants of the previous regime.

I'm sure there must be many Iranians who do not like the present regime, who would like to see it changed. But as I said before, I think the chances of contacting these elements, and finding them in some kind of position of power at this stage of the game is really very small.

MR. WILL: So the implications of that, then, is that it would be imprudent for the United States to risk as much as it did risk on a probability as small as you see this to have been.

MINISTER AHRENS: I didn't say that. I think it was a legitimate objective. And I think the price that was paid is really not very significant.

MR. DONALDSON: Well, then, what you're saying is that you think the Iranian connection is over, that there will be no more progress made in trying to renew those sorts of contacts?

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MINISTER AHRENS: No, I didn't say that either.

And unfortunately, I don't know enough about that to be able to tell you if it's over or not. I said I think the likelihood of making that connection and finding moderate people in that country at the present time is not very high.

MR. BRINKLEY: Mr. Ahrens, thank you. Thanks very much for being with us today. Enjoyed having you.

Coming next, Senator Byrd of West Virginia, the Democratic leader in the Senate; and Senator Leahy, Vice Chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence; and shortly, Robert Mc Farlane, who should know as much or more about this than anyone else who went to Iran.

In a moment.

[Announcements]

MR. BRINKLEY: Senator Byrd, Senator Leahy, thank you both very much for coming in today.

Now, there's been a good deal of critical comment from Congress -- various members of Congress, about the dealings with Iran. Now tell me, what are you so unhappy about? That it happened, or that Congress wasn't informed?

SENATE MINORITY LEADER BYRD: I'm unhappy because I think this was a massive political blunder that undermines the credibility of the Administration and the nation, and puts at risk not only the getting back of hostages but also our future overall strategic objectives in the world.

MR. BRINKLEY: The President says he was not dealing for hostages. Are you not persuaded on that point?

SENATOR BYRD: No I'm not persuaded on that point. I think that was one of the components of the objectives that was to be reached.

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MR. BRINKLEY: Senator Leahy?

SENATOR LEAHY: Well, I think it's been devastating. We've been trying to put together an anti-terrorism policy. This has set it back immeasurably.

And no matter what they say, there were three shipments of arms into Iran. And after each shipment, a hostage came out. It sends a signal to terrorists anywhere: if you want to get American arms, seize an American hostage.

But more importantly, it's a case where they were running the State Department, the CIA and the Defense Department out of the basement of the White House without any kind of congressional oversight. And they end up with a disaster.

MR. BRINKLEY: So your view is, it has been one shipment of arms, one hostage; a simple equation.

SENATOR LEAHY: No I'm not. I'm saying that that is the impression that is given to terrorist nations.

Iran is a terrorist nation, as is Libya and Syria. And I wonder what this does to the ability of the United States to put together a credible anti-terrorist policy, one that we would be joined in by the other NATO countries.

MR. WILL: Let's assume you'd been told about this in a timely manner. And you had said, as you're implying you would have said: don't do this; this is folly. And then they went ahead. How would that have changed things

SENATOR LEAHY: Well, I think that's hypothetical that we don't even get to reach, because nobody was told.

There is a provision in the law which says that they must notify certain members of Congress of a covert action in a timely fashion.

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MR. WILL: Is this timely?

SENATOR LEAHY: No, this is not timely, in my estimation. The people who were notified were the new-found friends of the Administration in Tehran, not the Republican or Democratic leadership of the Congress.

MR. WILL: Either Senator can speak to this.

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The Casey Accords, so-called, which worked out how the Intelligence Committee would be informed, appear to have been violated, as well as some other laws pertaining to the shipments of arms.

There are going to be hearings, I gather, into this. What should happen if the law is broken? Should people resign when laws get broken If so, who?

SENATOR LEAHY: Well, the law is very, very ambiguous. It says, in a timely fashion. Eleven months is not timely.

Senator Byrd has some suggestions for that, and I'd rather yield to him on that issue.

SENATOR BYRD: Well, I think that there will be plenty of options.

I think the important thing here now is for the President to move as quickly as he can to repair the damage that has been done. And one way you can do this is to state publicly, and act unequivocally, to stop arm shipments not only to Iran but to any terrorist state, and to terrorists.

And secondly, I think the Administration ought to move quickly to mount an intensive, high level, sustained effort in the Middle East to get the peace movement back on the track.

MR. DONALDSON: Senator Byrd, will there be hearings in the Senate, and if so, when?

SENATOR BYRD: Yes, there will be hearings,

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immediately. I understand that the Intelligence Committee will hold hearings this coming week.

SENATOR LEAHY: Friday.

MR. DONALDSON: One of the principal actors in this appears to be Admiral John Poindexter, the President's National Security Adviser. Presidents have not allowed their National Security Adviser to come to Capitol Hill to testify. They have invoked Executive Privilege if necessary. If Mr. Reagan does that, what's your answer?

SENATOR BYRD: I think one of the problems with the Administration is that it's acted in secret. And it seems to feel that winning is winning the PR battle.

I think that what we've got to do -- I think of winning as developing a comprehensive geopolitical foreign policy strategy that promotes the best interests of this nation. And we're ready to help the President. But at some point or other, the Administration is going to have to be accountable for its actions.

SENATOR LEAHY: I think it's immaterial in a way if Admiral Poindexter does not come up. The Director of the CIA will come up and will talk to us.

MR. DONALDSON: Well, on that point --

SENATOR LEAHY: And the matter will be explored at great detail.

I've talked with Admiral Poindexter, as have a number of the rest of us. I don't know what he might add to what goes on. They've got a --

MR. DONALDSON: He ran the operation, did he not?

SENATOR LEAHY: And it was a fiasco. And I think that the facts of how bad the fiasco was have come out. Very much.

MR. DONALDSON: There is a report, if I may, that

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President Reagan in writing ordered Director Casey of the CIA to break his contract with you, which he had given you in writing, that he would notify you on any covert operation within 48 hours -- the President of the United States, if this report is true, ordered the CIA Director to shut Congress out. What then happens?

SENATOR LEAHY: Well, there's two ways of responding to that. One, if that happened, Mr. Casey will tell us. Because he does have to respond to the Senate Intelligence Committee.

MR. DONALDSON: Under oath?

SENATOR LEAHY: And secondly would be --

MR. DONALDSON: Under oath? Under oath, Senator?

SENATOR LEAHY: That's a decision the committee makes. But he would respond on this question.

Secondly, if he was so ordered by the President, the way the law is written, the ambiguous way the law is written, he would have to follow the orders of the President in that case. The law says that we must be notified in a timely fashion.

That was put in there in case something happens at 3 o'clock on a Sunday morning. You're not going to bring the congressional committees together at 3 o'clock on a Sunday morning. But 11 months? Nobody can call 11 months timely.

MR. WILL: Is there some kind of legislative history in this? This is sort of negotiated, I gather.

SENATOR LEAHY: There is some.

MR. WILL: A lawyer from your committee sat in Mr. Casey's outer office for hours waiting for this to be signed. Might they not say, well, timely means ina manner that would not jeopardize national security, and therefore it could be 11 months? Are we going to have an argument about this?

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SENATOR LEAHY: No. No, that could not be.

In fact, we have had matters where the Democratic and Republican leaders of the House and the Senate are notified of far, far more critical than this in a very, very short period.

The fact is that the Administration was more willing to trust their friends in Tehran that they somehow feel are moderates, than they were leadership here. But they were also doing their best to cut out the State Departent and the Defense Department --

MR. DONALDSON: But Senator Byrd, may I ask you on that point --

SENATOR LEAHY: -- and they somehow want to run it out of the basement of the White House.

MR. DONALDSON: On that point, Secretary Shultz, we are told, wasn't for this. But in fact he carried it out in the sense of telling our allies that we wanted them to impose an arms embargo in Iran, when he knew that the United States was breaking its own embargo. What position does that put Shultz in? Can he effectively represent the United States now?

SENATOR BYRD: I think it puts him in a very difficult position.

But I think what we see here is just another symptom of the confusion and the disarray that's within the White House in the -- in connection with the formulation of foreign policy.

And I think what needs to be done quickly is for the President to order a complete review of the foreign policymaking process from the top down, and move toward improvements that would bring in the knowledgeable departments and the responsible officials and the members of Congress. And we stand ready to be supportive. If we're going to have an effective foreign policy, it's going to have to be bipartisan in

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nature, and it would be supported bipartisan.

MR. DONALDSON: This is the President's policy.

SENATOR BYRD: If the Administration will be open with us.

MR. DONALDSON: What do you mean, review? This is the President's policy.

SENATOR BYRD: I know, but --

MR. DONALDSON: Mr. Reagan ordered, we are told -- Mr. Reagan authorized it.

SENATOR BYRD: Oh, yes, on this. Yes.

I'm talking about the overall foreign policy. The Administration has no comprehensive, coordinated foreign policy anywhere in the world. And this latest fiasco in the Middle East merely underlines that.

MR. BRINKLEY: We've got one minute left.

I would like to ask you this. You say you are not presuaded by the President saying he was not bargaining for hostages. In your judgment, then, what was he doing?

SENATOR BYRD: I think -- in the beginning, I think that that was the central thrust. But I think as it developed, all of these other purposes came in. Some of them legitimate, such as long-term improvement of relatons with Iran. It's all right to have a dialogue, but we should not send arms to Iran in violation of our own policy.

SENATOR LEAHY: I think when this fiasco started to unroll, they rectroactively tried to find all the reasons why they did it. And they're having an even more difficult time doing that.

MR. BRINKLEY: We understand that Secretary Shultz, who is on the air somewhere, I don't know where, has just

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MR.BRINKLEY; Right. No more.

SENATOR LEAHY: Could I say this?

MR. BRINKLEY: Please.

SENATOR LEAHY: I gave the respoonse to the President yesterday on the radio response. And I said, we do want to have a bipartisan foreign policy.

There's two years left in his Administration. We have some enormous terrorist problems facing us. We need a bipartisan foreign policy. I'd hope that the Administration would realize what a disaster they have now, and acccept that offer from leading Republicans and Democrats in the Congress.

MR. BRINKLEY: Senatopr Leahy, and Senator Byrd, thank you. Thank you both for coming.

Coming next, Robert McFarlane, formerly National Security Assistant in the Reagan White House, who, as I've said went to Iran.

In a moment.

[Announcements]

MR. BRINKLEY: Mr. McFarlane, in Chicago, thank you very much for coming in today. Glad to have you with us.

Now, you have heard what has gone before in this program, including two Democratic Senators, who, not surprisingly were quite critical. Would you like to respond to some of their complaints? Which one?

MR. ROBERT McFARLANE: Well, David, I think there are two very legitimate questions to be asked by the American people and your own panel there.

And that is, number one, was it sensible policy. And number two, was it properly carried out.

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I think that it is pretty straight forward, when you look at Iran, to understand how important it is for the West, for Japan, for all of us to restore a measure of stability in our relations with Iran, if that is possible.

As to whether it was properly carried out or not, that turns, importantly, on a single issue, and that is, are there elements in Iran or not who wish to reorient Iran if that is possible.

As to whether it was properly carried out or not, that turns, importantly on a single issue, and that is, are there elements in Iran or not who wish to reorient Iran's policies?

Now if there are, and I think that should be argued, then dealing with them, strengthening them, reorienting Iran's policy through them is a very sensible policy goal.

Now, before, there are facts on the table to reach pre-judgments as I think many in the press are, is a little bit to indicate a predisposition, I think. And I think for the Congress to conclude, before having all the facts in front of them, is a little bit a source of dismay.

MR. DONALDSON: Mr. McFarlane, why was it necessary toi send arms to accomplish the goals that you have just outlined?

MR. McFARLANE: That's a very good point, Sam.

I think if you ask yourself, if you were a person in Iran who wished to reorient Iran's policies, and you're in a climate over there which is not very hospitable to trying to change things. You are vulnerable.

What is it that you would like to do, if you were in their shoes, to survive, to assure your own position, and over time, change the policy?

Well, you ought to have a constituency, oughtn't you?

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And that constituency would ask you, show me some evidence. Show me you have some influence, some standing. And these very modest levels, or so I'm told, could not have had any effect other than perhaps to strengthen those elements who wanted to steer a different course.

MR. DONALDSON: Well, is it your position then that if moderates in Iran wanted to porove that they could do business with the United States, the way to do it was to ship them arms, and they could say: see, we've got some arms now. The United States is in fact in contact with us.

MR. McFARLANE: Well, I think the point -- and I'll make it again -- is that if people truly want to change the policy in Iran, that's going to be opposed by radicals, and they are going to be at great risk.

In order to secure themselves, it wouldn't surprise me if they needed to go to elements of the army, the Revolutionarty Guard, or the police, to demonstrate their bona fides. Now if modest levels of arms made that possible for them to carry on in this moderate direction, it seems to me a reasonable price to pay.

MR. DONALDSON: One more question on this subject. Is that then the view that we ought to carry forward with other states when we're trying to contact moderate elements. Moderates levels in the Soviet Union. Moderate elements in Syria. Moderate elements in Libya. We ought to have said that there is an opposition to Colonel Qadafi. Ought we to send them arms, Mr. McFarlane?

MR. McFARLANE: Well, Sam that°s a very good point. It is peremptorily posed. But I think this: One has to have some judgment abvut whether there are moderate elements or not.

Now I would say that thus far I've seen no evidence that there are in Syria, in Libya. And so you don't do that.

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But where you can find people who, because of the general decline of the economy in Iran, when they look to the north, they see 26 divisions; to the east, 100,000 Russians, to the west, the loss of a million people in a war. And all around them in Tehran, general deccline of their economy. It isn't surprising that moderate elements do emerge, unlike these other countries that you mention.

MR. WILL: Mr. McFarlane, no one's doubting that there's dissent, dissatisfaction, and some moderate elements.

What I'm having trouble understanding is how you get to talk to them. That is, if you're going to deal with people who believe that there should be a fundamental change in Iran's policy, you're dealing with people radically at odds with the existing government of Iran.

You fly into Iran, and start talking to them? Is that the kind of society that it is? And you come in and you deliver them what you call a modest supply of defensive arms, and you say, go start working against the policies and the -- really the core values of this regime, how does this work? It sounds preposterous.

MR. McFARLANE: Well, I think that the history of evolution in other countries, George, is analogous, that countries recognize that when their strategic interest would be served by a relationship with the United States, they reach out and try to start that kind of conversation. So that is the way it happens.

MR. WILL: Mr. McFarlane, are you saying then that the Ayatollah is reaching out, or people fundamentally opposed to him? And if they're fundamentally opposed to him, how do they get away with it?

MR. McFARLANE: Well, carefully. But basically --

MR. WILL: They meet you in hotels. Planes land; planes that take off from Israel.

I mean, all kinds of things here that I would think

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would alert the security forces under the Ayatollah's control that someone, at a high level, is working against his policy.

MR. McFARLANE: Well, George, I think the issue as you cast it generally portrays what is a very sensitive process. And it is always sensitive, whether one talks about China, or change in other countries. Yes, you are at risk when you decide to change from bad to good. But that doesn't mean you ought not try it.

MR. WILL: Mr. McFarlane, I guess what I'm suggesting is that you're not dealing with dissident elements; that the logic of this is that you're dealing with the regime itself, that is leading you to believe that you're dealing with moderate elements; but since they're moderate elements who have to be doing this at the sufference of the Ayatollah, are they not?

MR. McFARLANE: Well, I think certainly, we wouldn't begin in the first place if the people involved hadn't demonstrated their bona fides. And it has nothing to do with hostages. In other actions, in risks that they took which made clear their own good faith.

But you're quite right, the central issue here is were there really moderate elements or not. Will they over time change the policies or not? Will they over tiume change the policies or not? If there are not, that's a bad idea. If there are, it's a good idea.

MR. BRINKLEY: While you were there, did you talk to anyone you believe to be a moderate, that is, not a fanatic follower of the Ayatollah

MR. McFARLANE: Yes, I did. I talked to a number in that turn of mind.

MR. BRINKLEY: Aren't they now in danger of being hanged for talking to you?

MR. McFARLANE: Yes, they are.

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MR. WILL: Was Mr. Ahrens right in 1982 when he told the Boston Globe that Israel had been sending arms to Iran in coordination with the United States at almost the highest levels in order to woo the oifficer corps?

MR. McFARLANE: I don't know. I honestly had never heard of such a thing. And I doubt that it occurred.

MR. DONALDSON: Mr. McFarlane, in the summer of 1985, we are told that the United States condoned a shipment of arms to Iran that did not come from the United States but a third country. Israel has been identified, but not publicly. Who authorized that condoning of that shipment of arms?

MR. McFARLANE: Well, you assert something which is hypothetical, Sam. The fact is that no American nut, bolt, or any other item from anywhere in the United States went anywhere in 1985.

MR. DONALDSON: Excuse me, Mr. McFarlane, it is not hypothetical.

The Chief of Staff, Mr. Regan, on the record has admitted that in 1985 a shipment of arms went to Iran that was not from the United States. But he agrees that the US condoned. He says it happened because we were asked whether we had any objections, and we said we had no objections.

My question to you is, who condoned it? Was it President Reagan, or someone beneath him?

MR. McFARLANE: Well, you should pursue that with him.

MR. DONALDSON: You were the National Security Adviser, sir.

MR.McFARLANE: The issue, Sam, is that at no time did we send, did we authorize, did we otherwise encourage anything to a terrorist anywhere.

MR. DONALDSON: Mr. McFarlane, are you denying that the United States condoned a shipment of arms in the summer

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of '85? Are you arguing with the Chief of Staff?

MR. McFARLANE: Sam, I think that that kind of portrayal doesn't match my own understanding of the issue.

And in checking, as I have said, no American item, nor to the best of my knowledge, the scenario that you spin out, went forward as you portray it.

MR. DONALDSON: It's on the record, sir.

MR. BRINKLEY: Well, we have to end it on that note.

Mr. McFarlane, thank you. Thanks very much for being with us today.

MR. McFARLANE; Thank you.

MR. BRINKLEY: Enjoyed having you with us.

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